

The Institute of Public Administration Australia  
(ACT Division) (IPAA) presents a conference on

## **Public Inquiries and Royal Commissions: Issues and Trends**

**Date:** Thursday 22 September 2005

**Venue:** Rydges Lakeside Hotel, Canberra

**Time:** 9am - 3.15pm

**Cost:** \$495.00 (includes \$45.00GST, morning tea and lunch)

Hardly a day passes in Australia without some government appointing a public inquiry, or some inquiry report being released proposing administrative restructuring, new policy initiatives, more spending or in some cases, less.

Public inquiries, like royal commissions, task forces, committees – those temporary, ad hoc and external bodies so often appointed by governments that produce reports and numerous recommendations – seem to be one of the constant consumer items of modern government regardless of who is in power.

They impact on government policy, attract media attention, dominate the debate, provoke submissions and discussions.

Why do governments resort to public inquiries given their access to large and seemingly ever responsive public bureaucracies, an extensive ministerial staff, external consultants and an expanded parliamentary committee system?

What do public inquiries have that these other advisory bodies lack?

After all, appointing a public inquiry is not without risks to a government. Public inquiries sometimes roam in previously out of bound waters, find the unexpected and make embarrassing proposals that have caused governments to fall.

The persistent use of public inquiries by both State and Commonwealth governments may indicate some fundamental problems such as a loss of trust in our institutions of government including the public service, ministers, ministerial staff and even universities. In this environment the public inquiry may have become an institution of last resort. If this is the case how have public inquiries achieved this and how do they operate?

This forum brings together academics, public inquiry chairs and media commentators to assess why inquiries are appointed, trends in their use, their processes and their impacts on government policy.

## Such a review is overdue:

- Since federation over 600 public inquiries including 120 royal commissions have been appointed by successive Commonwealth governments;
- Since the mid 1970s public inquiry numbers in Australia have increased compared to their use in other Westminster democracies.
- Public inquiry costs have exceeded \$300 million during the last couple of decades.
- Public inquiries have investigated issues ranging from financial deregulation, maladministration and major accidents to government corruption.
- Some public inquiries like royal commissions have exercised coercive powers of investigation that some have seen as a threat to civil liberties.

## Key topics

- Trends, history and roles of public inquiries in Australia
- Why governments appoint public inquiries
- How public inquiries work
- Impact of public inquiries on policy direction and public debate
- Government tactics in managing public inquiries
- Long term future use of public inquiries

## Keynote speakers

### **Professor John Wanna,**

The Sir John Bunting Professor in Public Administration at the Australian National University.

### **Dr Scott Prasser,**

Senior Lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast has written extensively on public inquiries and royal commissions.

### **Dr Greg McCarthy,**

Department of Politics, Adelaide University.

### **Mark Westfield,**

author of *HIH: The Inside Story of Australia's Biggest Corporate Collapse*, and consultant with Cosway PR group

### **Harry Evans,** Clerk of the Senate

### **David Stanton,**

Deputy Chair of the recent *Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support* and formerly Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

### **Professor Stephen Bartos,**

Director of the National Institute for Governance at the University of Canberra, will focus on the present government's use of more confidential inquiries.

### **David Trebeck,**

Former Managing Director of ACIL Consulting who chaired the *Committee of Inquiry into Fuel Taxation*

### **Jack Waterford,** Chief Editor, *The Canberra Times*

### **Dr John Howard,**

Managing Director, Howard Partners Pty Ltd; Visiting Fellow, Australian Centre for Innovation, The University of Sydney on the role of research in public inquiries.

## Program

### Session 1: Overview

9.00-10.30

Session 1 provides an overview of public inquiries, defines their different forms and outlines their history and key issues in assessing what they do and the roles they perform.

- Professor John Wanna** "Welcome and Overview"  
**Dr Scott Prasser** "Role, History and Issues of Australian Public Inquiries"  
**Harry Evans** "Senate Committees and Public Inquiries: Strengths and Differences"  
**Professor Stephen Bartos** "The Howard Government's Private Inquiries"

### Morning Tea

10.30-11.00

### Session 2: Public Inquiries in Action

11.00-12.45pm

Session 2 focuses on what public inquiries do, how they operate, and the problems they encounter.

- David Stanton** "The Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support,"  
**David Trebeck** "Committee of Inquiry into Fuel Taxation"  
**Dr John Howard** "Research and Public Inquiries"

### Lunch

12.45-1.45pm

### Session 3: Do Public Inquiries Matter?: Impact of Public Inquiries

1.45-3.15pm

Session 3 analyses the impact of public inquiries on public policy.

- Mark Westfield** "The Royal Commission into HIH"  
**Dr Greg McCarthy** "Recent South Australian Public Inquiries and Royal Commissions"  
**Jack Waterford** "A View from the Media"  
**Professor John Wanna / Dr Scott Prasser** "Future issues"

